

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks****Volunteers and the Montana Wolf Program**

FWP first took over wolf monitoring from the federal government in northwest Montana in the fall of 2004 and did so statewide by spring of 2005 through a Cooperative Agreement even though the wolf was still a listed species. FWP has been actively soliciting volunteer help to monitor wolves ever since.

Observations of wolves, wolf kills, wolf tracks and wolf scat provided by landowners, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts, and other agency personnel is invaluable. That information helps FWP document wolf activity in new areas, verify wolf activity in areas suspected of having wolves, and discern between adjacent packs. Volunteer reports also help confirm the sizes, colors, and breeding pair status of packs. Having good information about wolf numbers and distribution is important.

FWP's monitoring efforts, with the public's help, produce the reported minimum number of wolves, wolf packs, and breeding pairs in the state as of December 31 of each calendar year. This information is used to make management decisions (e.g. hunting quotas or updating depredation response protocols) and to demonstrate maintenance of a recovered population so that the wolf need not be re-listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

FWP has learned that the public's eyes and the ears contribute a lot of useful information that directly contributes to wolf monitoring efforts. FWP strives to make it easy for the public to help, which they do and at very little cost to the agency. This helps agency resources go farther and makes sure they are used as efficiently as possible.

FWP has a four- pronged approach to using volunteers to help monitor wolves:

1. public outreach about how to identify wolves and wolf sign and how to help
2. active solicitation of public reports of wolves or wolf sign and how to report data
3. volunteerism in the field
4. apply volunteer data to finalize and report more accurate wolf counts and make decisions.

**Public Outreach – Wolf Identification and How to Help Monitor Wolves**

FWP uses a variety of methods to make information available to the public about how to identify wolves and wolf sign and how to help monitor the population. Often, that outreach effort will include information about wolf management. FWP outreach efforts are in addition to the efforts of others, including federal agencies and local or statewide non-governmental organizations.

**Specific FWP Information Outlets and Outreach Efforts:**

- FWP Website
  - Wolf Program Web pages (visited 109,648 times in 2009)
  - Hunt Planner and Field Guide web pages (information there and a link to the Montana Natural Heritage Montana Animal Field Guide which had about 3900 visitors in 2009)
- Wolf Weekly Report distributed electronically and published on the FWP Wolf Program page
- Hunting/Trapping Regulations: wolf identification page and other important information



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- License Agent Newsletters and printed materials provided to license agents for display
- Montana Outdoors magazine, FWP Outdoor reports (TV), weekly radio talk shows, FWP media releases
- Personal contacts at check stations, season setting meetings, one on one conversations, etc.
- Attend and present information at others' meetings (wolf staff made 63 formal presentations in 2009, with about 2800 people attending)
- TIP-MONT traveling trailer
- Radio, television, and print media interviews
- FWP-sponsored or FWP-attended Teacher Training Workshops (e.g. Project Wild, educational trunks available for check out)
- Hunter Education, Bow Hunter, Trapper Education classes and instructor training workshops
- Distribution and availability of pre-printed wolf report postcards – available at license agents, any FWP office, many U.S. Forest Service offices, etc.
- Solicit participation and gather information from other state and federal agencies.

### **Solicitation of Volunteer Reports and How to Contribute Data**

FWP actively solicits public participation to help wolf monitor wolves. The public can contribute their data to FWP in a variety of ways. This information directs FWP field efforts on where to look for new packs in new areas. It also helps FWP verify that known packs still exist, determine how many wolves are in the pack, and whether it reproduced that year.

In February 2005, FWP began distributing pre-printed postcards which gather the same information as the FWP online reporting tool. The cards are available from any license agent, from FWP field personnel directly, at any FWP office, and many U.S. Forest Service offices. Upon receipt, these postcards are also routed directly to wolf management specialists.

In October 2005, FWP created an on-line reporting feature on the FWP Wolf Program webpage so that the public could enter their observational data at their convenience. These reports are routed directly to the appropriate FWP wolf management specialists, who then can match them with other public reports and investigate the area. Since fall 2005, FWP has received about 1200 reports. See <http://fwp.mt.gov/wolf> and look for the green "Report a Wolf" icon part way down the page.

Beginning with the 2007 hunting season, FWP started exploring the potential of collecting hunter reports using the annual telephone harvest survey. A research project with the University of Montana was initiated not long after to figure out a way to estimate wolf population size and distribution using the info provided directly by hunters. FWP began asking deer and elk hunters if they had a wolf or wolves while hunting and if so, when, where, and how many. For the 2007 and 2008 hunting seasons, about 5-7% of hunters reported seeing wolves (2500 and 5500 hunters, respectively). Data from the 2009 telephone harvest survey are not yet available. Not surprisingly, hunters are able to successfully detect wolves where wolves live, and hunters reported seeing more wolves where more wolves lived. Thus, information gathered from hunters tracked actual wolf monitoring data well and the approach appears promising.



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And since FWP first took over in 2005, the public has called or emailed FWP personnel directly with wolf reports. These reports are combined with online reports, postcards, and other public reports and FWP's own information.

### Volunteerism in the Field

Beginning with the 2006 field season, FWP has had a formal volunteer program in place. Volunteers use FWP vehicles and are paid at the standard in-state *per diem* rates or are provided with food in lieu of receiving *per diem*. Local citizens and college students work side by side with FWP wolf management specialists and also independently to investigate clusters of public wolf reports that suggest new pack activity. This helps FWP prioritize trapping / collaring efforts and maximizes efficiency in the field. Volunteers also help with trapping, radio-tracking of collared wolves, and even do snow track surveys in the winter. In some years, volunteers have donated the equivalent of 1.5 FTEs, usually more.

FWP has worked directly with a number of watershed groups and smaller groups of landowners producers in local areas to gather their local knowledge about wolf activity and share ours with them. In some cases, watershed groups hire or sponsor range riders. Riders are in the field for extended periods of time and could see wolves or wolf sign. That information has also directly contributed to monitoring efforts and wolf population counts.

FWP also participates in community-organized monitoring events, such as the one organized by the Blackfoot Challenge. These community-based efforts put volunteers in the field all at the same time and throughout a watershed, or localized area. The idea is have data collected throughout the area simultaneously (e.g. volunteers record wolf sightings, wolf sign, and locations), which helps identify specific packs and discern one from another since a wolf pack can't be in or leave fresh tracks / scat in two places at the same time. The Blackfoot Challenge first organized such a weekend effort in 2008. It has contributed to FWP's knowledge significantly and community members learn more about wolf packs in their areas which is important to them.

### Summary

FWP has used volunteers to help monitor wolves since taking on the program from the federal government in 2005. FWP tries to make it as easy as possible for interested people to participate in wolf monitoring efforts and offers many different ways for the public to forward their field data. Formal volunteer-organizing at the community level is not necessary, but can be useful to local communities if area residents are willing to set aside 1-2 days to do a "wolf route" and participate more directly. Because landowners, hunters, and other outdoor enthusiasts spend so much time in the field, they are some of the best volunteers FWP has.

Data contributed by the public has led directly to verification of new packs and identifying the boundary between adjacent packs. It has also helped FWP nail down the number of wolves in packs and whether the pack qualified as a breeding pair. This in turn, helps FWP obtain and report more accurate wolf counts and make management decisions, such as hunting quotas and updating depredation response protocols.